



Edward Charles Ehrensperger

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This issue of *Names* was to have celebrated the occasion of the ninetieth birthday of Edward Ehrensperger, in recognition of the significant and long-standing contributions he made to the American Name Society. When plans were first made, in December 1983, he was in good health, though in a care center. Unfortunately, in April 1984, his health failed quickly and he died on April 18, 1984, a few weeks short of his eighty-ninth birthday. This special issue then, to which a few of his many friends have contributed essays, is dedicated to his memory.

Edward Charles Ehrensperger was born on May 23, 1895, in Indianapolis, Indiana. Although both of his parents were natives of Indianapolis, his paternal grandparents had come from Germany. The name *Ehrensperger* is apparently a normal variant of the more common *Ehrenberger*, the *s* causing unvoicing of *b* to *p*.

Ed graduated from Shortridge High School in Indianapolis in 1912. He went from there to Harvard, where by 1921 he had received all three of his degrees. His A.B. degree, in 1916, was awarded summa cum laude and "with highest honors in English." Before going on to earn the A.M. degree in 1918, he studied in England, France, and Italy as a Sheldon Fellow of Harvard. After the Ph.D., he won a Sheldon Post-Doctoral Fellowship to study in Germany. The next year, 1922-23, as an American-Scandinavian Fellow, he studied in Sweden.

At Harvard, Ed's Academic inclinations were toward Medieval and Renaissance literature and philology. He studied Shakespeare under G.L. Kittredge and Old and Middle English under F.N. Robinson. His dissertation on Middle English dream visions was directed by Robinson, who cites the dissertation in the introductory remarks to "The Book of the Duchess" in his edition of Chaucer's *Works*.

In 1923, on his return from Sweden, Ed took a position as instructor of English at Northwestern University in Illinois. Eugene Vest, long active in ANS, was one of his first students and remembers him as "brainy and entertaining" and an important influence on his own decision to go to

Harvard for a Ph.D. After two years Ed left Northwestern to become an assistant professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. He was there until 1932.

In June 1931, he married Helen Sweezy of Cambridge, Massachusetts. That spirit of adventure which would later take them to South Dakota drew them on their honeymoon to the isolated monastery at Iona, on the western side of Scotland.

In July of 1932, back to teach at Northwestern for the summer, Ed heard about an opening for a chairman and professor at the University of South Dakota. He took the train from Chicago to check it out and to his own surprise liked the dusty little campus in the little town of Vermillion. He convinced Helen that there was room to grow in South Dakota, and, after buying a new Ford, set out from Cambridge for the five-day drive – sometimes at speeds up to thirty-five miles per hour – to South Dakota. On a hot Sunday in late August, they entered the state that would be their home for the rest of their lives. The paved road extended only a few miles into the state and they drove the last twenty miles on a dusty highway, certainly foreshadowing the years to come, when South Dakota suffered its worst era yet, the drought and dust bowl days of the middle 1930's.

The Ehrenspergers stayed in Vermillion for thirty-two years. There they raised their two sons: Charles, now in California, and Donald, now in Illinois. When Ed retired as head in 1962, he stayed on as professor of English until Yankton College, twenty-five miles away, asked him to head its English department. Ed was sixty-nine years old, but they sold their house, moved to Yankton, and started a new career. Helen also taught English part-time. He chaired the Yankton College English department for eight years, retiring once again in 1972.

Ed Ehrensperger's professional career had many facets. His teaching emphasis was British literature, especially Shakespeare, and he was passionately concerned with the quality of training for high school English teachers. His interest in language led him to the study of place names. In the early 1930's, Louise Pound of the University of Nebraska convinced him of the value of dialect and name studies and he joined the American Dialect Society. Sometime in the middle 1930's he met Robert L. Ramsay, whose Missouri place-name studies, in conjunction with Allen Walker Read, set the standard for other states to follow. At Ramsay's suggestion, Ehrensperger began to interest graduate students in place-name research, and in 1938 he directed the first of sixteen M.A. theses devoted to the study of names in individual South Dakota counties.

In 1939, Ehrensperger convinced the head of the Federal Writers' Program (a WPA project) in South Dakota to allow him the use of that

agency to research place names. These writers and teachers, who were scattered all over the state, scoured the records, interviewed old people, and sent their findings to Ehrensperger and his staff. In less than a year, they produced a series of six pamphlets, explaining over six thousand names. Each of these pamphlets is about eighty pages long with the names arranged in groups by feature types. The fourth pamphlet, for example, is called "Mountains, Valleys, and Other Natural Features," and includes some thirty-five generic terms, ranging from amphitheatres to valleys, plus a miscellaneous category. In the following year, 1941, the mimeographed stencils were retyped, incorporating revisions and corrections, and the entire work reprinted as *South Dakota Place Names*. It was an uncopyrighted government publication sent free of charge to anyone who asked for one, as long as the supply lasted.

Meanwhile, Ehrensperger continued his involvement with place names at the national level. He was named to head the place-name committee of the American Dialect Society and each year in that capacity reported on research in progress. When the American Name Society was founded in 1951 (by Ehrensperger and eleven others), he was part of a three-man committee, with Frederic G. Cassidy and Francis L. Utley, to coordinate place-name activities between ANS and ADS. The committee was dropped in 1972, but Ehrensperger continued his annual summary of research in progress. Collecting this information required many letters and more than a few telephone calls. The report grew to nearly thirty pages by the time of his last one in 1982. In 1983 he turned it over to Kelsie Harder, who continues it under the name "The Ehrensperger Report."

When Ed Ehrensperger retired from Yankton College in 1972, he was ready to return to place-name research full time. His goal was to produce a revised and corrected version of the 1941 South Dakota study. He started by writing to county historical societies throughout the state. In a few cases, he got positive responses and new data. In other cases he got tentative replies, including some that suggested that what he needed to know could be found in the 1941 study. From many others there was no response at all. He knew that the task of revising would be a long and difficult one, and he had no help. Then in 1973 a company in Sioux Falls, without informing anyone connected with the original work, printed a revised version of the 1941 book. The revisions consisted of replacing 1940 census data with 1970 data and adding a few names, such as the four big new lakes created by dams on the Missouri River. Names of places long since gone, including townsites flooded by the lakes, were retained in the book with no notice of their extinction. The book, however, was

attractively printed and reasonably priced, and it has continued to be a successful market item. Ed was understandably disappointed with the publication of this book. Though it was largely *his* book, he was given almost no credit, and all of the errors he knew to be in the 1941 study were repeated. He also knew that if he produced a responsible revision there would be no market for a second place-name book for at least ten years.

Ed did not give up, however. He continued to gather material for his revision as well as carry on the correspondence for the annual report for the American Name Society. He was also active in his church, the United Church of Christ (Congregational), and he edited a history of that church in South Dakota; it was published in 1977.

In 1980 his wife Helen died, ending a close partnership of forty-nine years. Ed continued to live at his home in Yankton until his health forced him to move to a care center in the fall of 1983. He was mentally alert until he was taken to the hospital a week or so before he died. The book he was reading when he left for the hospital was a history of Saint Columba's founding of the monastery at Iona, where Ed and Helen had gone on their honeymoon in 1931.

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In December 1983 I sent letters to a few of Ed Ehrensperger's friends whom I knew to be interested in the study of place names. I requested the submission of essays for this special commemorative issue and a statement of appreciation to be presented to him on his ninetieth birthday. In both cases the response was overwhelming. So many essays came in that I had the difficult task of choosing the few that could be used. There were so many testimonials that space does not permit printing them as originally planned. Instead, these will be copied and gathered into a special binding and presented to each of Ed's sons, along with copies of this special issue of *Names*.

Those scholars whose papers appear in this issue represent only a few of those to whom I am indebted for assistance in putting together this memorial for the man who in his quiet way did so much to further the study of names in America. I wish, first of all, to acknowledge these people: Harold B. Allen, University of Minnesota; Lurline H. Coltharp, University of Texas at El Paso; Demetrius J. Georgacas, University of North Dakota; Eric P. Hamp, University of Chicago; William Koch, Kansas State University; Donald B. Lawrence, University of Minnesota; Lewis L. McArthur, Portland, Oregon; Alan Rayburn, Executive Secretary, Geographical Names, Canada; I. Willis Russell, University of Ala-

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